

# The QUEEN CITY'S

# RIDE TO THE TOP

Mountain biking is booming across the West, especially in areas like Helena, designated one of America's premier off-road cycling communities.

BY PEGGY O'NEILL

In many ways, my adult life has revolved around mountain bikes. I've owned six so far. Two were stolen. One tumbled down Interstate 90 when a swift wind caught the cheap rental bike rack that was inexpertly attached to my car. My other three survived to their retirement, but not without damage incurred by my neglect.

I've been on mountain bike dates, mountain bike outings with toddlers, mountain bike vacations. One of my first professional jobs was as the mountain biking editor for Falcon Publishing. And I've raised a son who recently returned from his first college spring break trip to Moab, Utah, the mecca of mountain biking. Of course, now he wants a fancy new mountain bike.

Who can blame him? Mountain biking is a fun, healthy outdoor activity. It boosts your heart rate, improves your balance, produces far less knee stress than running, and gets you to some of Montana's most scenic landscapes.

That's not to say the sport is easy, or always safe. Mountain biking requires leg strength, balance, and alertness. Accidents can happen. I've had my chin stitched up twice after flying over my handlebars going downhill, and I nearly gave up mountain biking altogether last year after a clueless rider soared off a jump and nearly landed on my head.

All this might make it sound like I'm an expert cyclist. I'm not. I'm still nearly as awkward on a mountain bike as when I pedaled my first rigid Trek 850 more than 30 years ago. While mountain biking equipment has evolved tremendously since then, my confidence hasn't. The steep, rock-strewn switchbacks are as scary as ever,

AARON THESEN



even though I now own a full-suspension bike with disc brakes.

But I've learned a lot about mountain biking over the past three decades. And for most of that time, I've lived in Helena, one of the nation's top mountain biking communities. I've watched the Queen City's trajectory to off-road cycling stardom, and learned how that rapid rise reflects the sport's popularity elsewhere in Montana and across the West.

### THE IRON RIDERS

Though most people consider mountain biking a relatively new form of outdoor recreation, the use of all-terrain bicycles in Montana dates back to the late 19th century with the formation of what were nicknamed the Iron Riders, or Buffalo Soldiers. The all-Black 25th Infantry Regiment Bicycle Corps rode bicycles from Montana to Missouri in 1897, a 1,900-mile journey. According to a

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2022 *Smithsonian* article, Lieutenant James Moss, who was stationed with the infantry in Fort Missoula, wanted to test how troops and bikes could handle the West's rough terrain.

Riders today might brag of "getting stoked" about a brutal ride or thrilling downhill, but the Buffalo Soldiers made one of the gnarliest trips ever recorded. "During their 41-day journey, the cyclists pedaled up mountains, through forests, over deserts and across rivers, riding on dirt trails, unpaved roads and railroad tracks..." wrote author David Kindy. "They biked upward of 50 miles per day, alternatively enduring snow, freezing sleet, hail, heavy rain and oppressive heat."

All this on single-speed bikes.

Various types of off-road and mountain biking evolved from there. Starting in the early 1900s, "cyclo-cross" racers in Europe pedaled standard road-racing bikes with knobby tires across rural countrysides—a grueling sport still popular today. Starting in the 1960s, innovative cyclists in Oregon,

California, and Colorado began experimenting with off-road bike designs. Jim Barnes, owner of Big Sky Cyclery in Helena, witnessed the evolution firsthand. "We wanted bikes to ride up mountains," he says. In the late 1970s, while working at a Missoula bike shop, Barnes and his co-workers began modifying single-speed Schwinn Cruisers with gears that made uphills easier. "We rode what we could and pushed what we couldn't," he says.

Emmett Purcell, also of Helena, started pushing his BMX bike up Mount Helena in 1977 when he was 12. A few years later, he was one of the few mountain bike racers from Montana competing on the National and World Cup circuits. By the 1990s, he was featured on the covers of cycling magazines. "I chased the racing thing pretty good," Purcell says. After his racing days



First mountain bike race in Whistler, British Columbia, June 1982



Bob Allen photo cover of *Bike* magazine, June 1998.

were over, Purcell gave back to the sport by building and maintaining trails.

Mountain bikers riding Helena's extensive South Hills Trail System can experience Purcell's handiwork on the epic Entertainment Trail on the back side of Mount Ascension and the trail that bears his name—Emmett's Trail—a few miles south of Mount Helena, right in the city's backyard. You can even celebrate a day spent in the South Hills with an E-Trail Pale Ale, named for Purcell, at the Blackfoot River Brewing Company.

As mountain biking grew increasingly popular, riders needed advice on where to take their new toys. Montana writer and rider Will Harmon stepped up. He bought his first mountain bike in 1981 with money earned from selling his guitar. "When I got to Bozeman in 1982, it was one of the first mountain bikes in town," Harmon says. He was featured in a *Bozeman Chronicle* story that year that declared mountain biking the "next big thing." Harmon, who has lived in Helena since 1988, went on to write several guidebooks for Falcon, including *Mountain Biking Bozeman* and *Mountain Biking Helena*.

Mountain bikes have come a long way from what the Buffalo Soldiers rode more than 125 years ago. Many now have 10 to 12 gears that allow riders to climb steep grades, as well as front-only and front and back shock absorbers (bikes equipped with these are



**WORLD CLASS** Helena's Emmett Purcell, who raced on the National and World Cup circuits, bikes down Entertainment Trail on the back side of Mount Ascension south of Helena.

known, respectively, as hardtails and full suspension models). Not surprising for a fellow who owns a bike shop, Barnes says he owns several different mountain bikes for various conditions—a full-suspension version for playing on the trails, a commuter bike to get to work, a no-suspension gravel bike for exercise and fun on flatter routes, and one with ultra-wide tires to cycle through snow. "Mountain bikes are now the standard bike for most people," Barnes says. "The sport caught fire in the '90s and leveled out in the

2000s. But with the introduction of full suspension and better brakes, it started growing again in the last 10 years."

### HIGH-QUALITY RIDES

Part of that growth comes from local efforts to promote trails to tourists and residents alike. Around 2011, the Helena Tourism Office hired marketing specialist Pat Doyle, now the marketing manager for Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks. Doyle conceived of a "Bike Helena" brand to promote the town's



**ORIGINAL IRONMEN** The nation's first mountain bikers were members of the all-Black 25th Infantry Regiment Bicycle Corps, who rode their single-speed two-wheelers from Montana to Missouri in 1897. On their 41-day, 1,900-mile journey, they pedaled through forests, deserts, and rivers.

F. JAY HAYNES; MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

FROM LEFT: PINGBIKE; MOUNTAIN BIKE ACTION; CHUCK HANEY



Cruising the scenic Eddy McClure trail in Helena's South Hills Trails System.

abundant off-road cycling routes.

"Helena is not a resort town, and it's a full hour off the main interstate crossing Montana," Doyle says. "But we have immediate front-country access that is linked by an incredible trail system. There's a trailhead at the end of almost every road in this town."

Over the previous two decades, community leaders had improved Helena's beauty and livability by conserving open space and expanding the multi-use trail network. Doyle invited national biking magazine writers and photographers to the Queen City. And he, with Purcell and cyclist and photographer Bob Allen—who was inducted into the International Mountain Biking Hall of Fame for his photos of national and international races—applied to designate Helena an International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) "Ride Center."

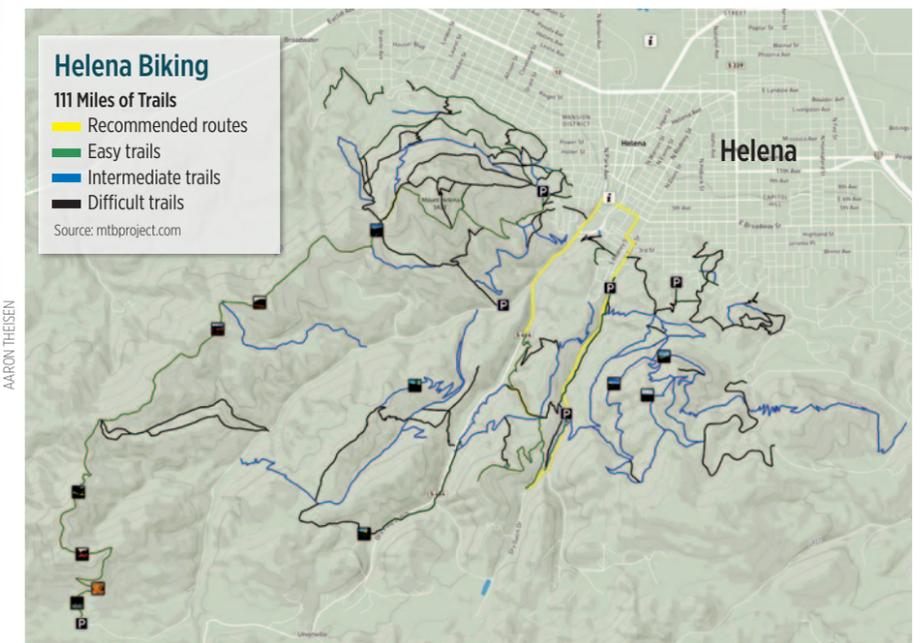
Doyle then assembled a group of elected officials, small business owners, and other community leaders to meet with IMBA

officials and show their support. After the IMBA team visited Helena and rode the South Hills Trails System, it declared Helena a Bronze-Level Ride Center. The group's website describes Ride Centers as "the pinnacle of mountain biking communities [where riders] will love the extensive variety of high-quality rides, plus plenty of fun beyond the trails."

A year later, the IMBA bumped Helena's designation up to Silver Level Ride Center, joining 15 other similarly honored communities worldwide, including Sun Valley, Idaho; Livigno, Italy; and Taupo, New Zealand. "There's no question that cycling is a huge part of our town," Doyle says. "Our trail system is attracting

people from outside the community while instilling local pride and participation."

Mountain biking's appeal in Helena and elsewhere is also multi-generational, Barnes says. One of the biggest changes he's seen in recent years is an aging clientele. "More older people are biking," he says. "I am also



**SO MANY OPTIONS** Helena's vast network of trails lace national forest land to the south and west of downtown. A fee shuttle service drives cyclists and their bikes up to several trailheads.



Paramount Trail at Makoshika State Park

### STATE PARKS AND WMAS WITH MOUNTAIN BIKING TRAILS

FWP manages more than a dozen state lands offering mountain biking trails. Find directions and maps at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). Note that some wildlife management areas (WMAs) may have closed areas, closed times, and other restrictions.

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|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA | Garry Mountain WMA       | Lone Pine State Park | Mount Haggin WMA |
| Blue Eyed Nellie WMA     | Giant Springs State Park | Makoshika State Park | Mount Jumbo WMA  |
| Calf Creek WMA           | Kootenai Falls WMA       | Marshall Creek WMA   | Warm Springs WMA |
| Fleecer Mountain WMA     |                          |                      |                  |

"There's a trailhead at the end of almost every road in this town."



**ON TOP** Above: A mountain biker summits a trail overlooking Helena. Left: A fee trail shuttle whisks mountain bikers to the back side of Mount Helena for an afternoon downhill ride.

**“Our trail system is attracting people from outside the community while instilling local pride and participation.”**

seeing generations of families. Someone who bought a bike in the '80s now comes in with their kids.” Harmon passed down his passion to his son, Evan, who manages a mountain bike shop in Missoula.

**TRAIL ETIQUETTE**

Increased trail use, especially by families, requires greater levels of patience and respect for other users. Since 2015, Mary Hollow has been executive director of the Helena-based Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT), which developed and maintains the South Hills Trails System. She says conflicts between trail users sometimes occur, but most hikers, trail runners, and mountain bikers are tolerant and

respectful of each other. “When I started here, trail etiquette just wasn’t an issue,” she says. “But with the growing use of the system, there’s far more awareness of the importance of outward kindness. People understand the need to smile, or to wave or say ‘Hi,’ or to move off the trail when someone wants to get past,” she says.

Trail users have also stepped up to help maintain these well-loved playgrounds. PPLT hosts volunteer work days—often led by Purcell—during warmer weather. “There has been a huge increase in volunteer trail days,” Hollow says. “People are really recognizing the value of their public lands and trails and that the trails need to be

maintained. They want to contribute.”

No one tracks mountain biking participation rates in Montana. But if the growing number of cars with bike racks crammed into trailhead parking lots is any indication, the sport is booming. As an outdoor recreation advocate, I’m excited that more people are discovering the sport’s many benefits. But the growth also poses challenges. Hollow’s report of increased civility on Helena’s trail system is heartening. I’ve seen it myself. Queen City mountain bikers and other users understand that our trails need regular maintenance, financial support, and cooperative use.

Hopefully, that’s happening on Montana’s

other trail systems, too. I’m looking forward to trying as many as possible in the coming years. I probably won’t be cycling for the rest of my life, but I’m pretty sure I have at least one or two good bikes left in me. 🐻

*Type “mountain biking Montana” in a search engine and you’ll find lots of online information on mountain biking opportunities. One of the best sites is the MTB Project ([mtbproject.com](http://mtbproject.com)), a crowd-sourced mountain biking guide that rates and maps more than 160,000 miles of trails nationwide. The project’s website recommends 56 routes in the Treasure State. For documentaries on the history of mountain bike development, type “mountain bike klunker.”*

**OTHER GREAT MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS**

- Bozeman’s Bangtail Divide Trail
- Butte’s Beaver Ponds Trail
- Big Sky’s Grizzly Loop
- Whitefish Trail
- Great Falls’ South Shore Trail
- Missoula’s Rattlesnake Loop
- Great Divide Mountain Bike Loop



Big Sky bike lift

Also, Montana’s Big Sky, Snowbowl, Whitefish, and Discovery ski resorts offer chairlift rides to the top of their mountain biking trails for (mostly) downhill rides.

**Mountain bikers need to be bear aware**



In 2016, a mountain biker was killed by a grizzly bear while riding in the Halfmoon Lakes area of the Flathead National Forest west of Glacier National Park. Officials believe the rider hit the bear unexpectedly while pedaling downhill around a bend. Grizzly bears can be almost anywhere west of the Continental Divide, and in recent years the population has expanded into historic range as far east as Interstate 15 and beyond.

Tips for cycling in bear country:

- ▶ Slow down and look ahead, especially in areas of dense vegetation, in berry patches, and around blind corners.
- ▶ Ride in daylight and in groups.
- ▶ Make noise! Let bears hear you, especially where visibility is limited.
- ▶ Carry quickly accessible bear pepper spray.

